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RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE UNFPA PROGRAMMING PROCESS

Report of the Executive Director

1 Executive Board decision 96/13, adopted at the second regular session 1996, called on the Executive Director to submit recommendations on the future country programming process of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for the Board's consideration at its annual session 1997. Part of that decision asked the Executive Director to review the format, content and timing of the documentation submitted to the Executive Board on country activities. At the third regular session 1996, UNFPA introduced a new format for its country programme proposals that responded to a number of concerns that had been expressed by members of the Board. The new presentations were an average of 40 per cent shorter than in the past, included data related to decision 96/15 on the new approach for the allocation of UNFPA resources, and focused on subjects of greatest interest to the Board, including lessons learned from past UNFPA programmes, the Fund's comparative advantage in relation to other donors, the planned strategy for the proposed programme, its implementation plan, and the expected results. At that and subsequent Board sessions, Executive Board members commented favourably on the new format, proposed some concrete suggestions and asked the Fund to continue to improve its coverage of the areas mentioned above. Given this broad approval, the Executive Director proposes to maintain this format for the presentation to the Executive Board of the Fund's proposed country programmes and to continue to work to improve them.

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2. A second part of decision 96/13 asked the Executive Director to consult with UNDP and UNICEF in order to consider ways of harmonizing the country programming process of UNFPA with those of its sister agencies. Although, in fact, the country programming processes of UNDP and UNICEF are different, there is a common theme that seems to have inspired the design of both of them -- the desire of the members of the Executive Boards to participate more effectively and at an earlier stage in the design of the country programmes. The Executive Director fully supports the perceived need for a more inclusive programming process. The Fund has, therefore, examined its own programming procedure to see how this can best be accomplished. In doing so, the Fund has kept three objectives in mind: (a) to promote effective input from all interested members of the Executive Board; (b) to respect the principles of multilateralism; and (c) to limit the administrative burden on UNFPA so that as much of the Fund's resources as possible are spent on the programmes themselves.

Input from members

3. UNFPA has always promoted and sought effective inputs from member governments in the programme formulation and approval process. This input can be most productive when it is the result of a real give-and-take between the Fund and member governments and when there is time for recommendations to be considered carefully and to be incorporated into the programme as it is designed. To achieve these aims and to have the most impact on the programmes themselves, therefore, any input should come as early as possible in the programming process. The Fund believes that this can best be achieved by involving member governments at the time of the programme review and strategy development (PRSD) exercise, which is the earliest stage of programme formulation.

4. Given the way the programme cycle works at UNFPA, it is not clear that the programming models used by some of its partner organizations would be as effective as possible in achieving the aim of effective participation and in being as cost effective as possible in utilizing management resources Under the current UNICEF system, for example, members of the Executive Board comment on the proposed strategy of the new programme approximately one year before the beginning of a new programme cycle and then adopt the "fleshed-out" programme, on a no-objection basis, at the Board session immediately before the programme is scheduled to begin. This requires, in effect, a double programming process, one to develop strategy, which may or may not be endorsed by the Board, and then one to present the programme. So far, at UNICEF this second stage has been a largely nominal process: in 1996 only one of the 40 programmes proposed for 1997 was discussed at the September Board meeting. However, the UNICEF secretariat expended a great deal of effort in preparing the 40 country documents for that session. Such a double process would put a severe strain on the resources of a small organization like UNFPA, both in terms of the programming process in the field and at headquarters and on the drafting and processing of the programme documents for Executive Board consideration.

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5 The process established for UNDP in Executive Board decision 96/7 calls upon the Administrator of UNDP to submit country cooperation frameworks "in a timely manner". These are then considered by the Board only if requested in writing by five members in advance. This is a new process, and it is not yet clear whether this provides adequate opportunity for the members to add their input to the design of the proposed programme. This is particularly true in that this input is delivered in the course of a short Board meeting, during which several programmes may discussed. The comments expressed during these Board meetings tend to be somewhat general and, in addition, members of the Board sometimes express divergent opinions on programme options. There is currently no mechanism to resolve such divergences within the framework of the Board, and it is not always clear how the programme can reflect all of the inputs adequately. There is little time for the dialogue and reconciliation of different opinions that is a major strength of UNFPA's PRSD process.

6. The programming process currently in place at the Fund necessarily takes place over a period of several months. This includes a mid-term review and the PRSD exercise, which normally takes place some 18 months before a new programme is scheduled to begin. Under the UNICEF model it would be necessary to begin this process much earlier in order to have a strategy ready for Board consideration a year in advance of the beginning of the proposed programme. The Fund's programming cycles are normally four or five years; this means that new programme development might well have to start more or less halfway through the old programme before, in fact, there is sufficient experience to base recommendations for the next cycle. As a matter of practicality, many programme activities often take place during the second part of a cycle because of the necessity of laying the foundations during the early part of the programme. Even as the cycle currently functions, it is often felt that there is not enough time to properly evaluate achievements and constraints when designing the next programme. It would be unwise to foreshorten this process any further.

7. For all of these reasons, the Fund feels that the most dynamic way of designing a more inclusive programming process is to involve representatives of member governments at an early stage, to consider all inputs carefully, in the context of the national development priorities of the programme country, and in a dialogue with the Government of the programme country during the time when the programme is actually being designed, i.e., during the PRSD exercise. This would be done in full expectation that the suggestions of the member governments would also be communicated to their representatives on the Executive Board, which would then provide the occasion for members of the Board to perform a vital monitoring and oversight function. The Board would have a much more informed basis than is sometimes currently possible in expressing its judgments and in grounding its ultimate approval or rejection of a proposed country programme. This would provide true member government input into the programme.

Principles of multilateralism

8. UNFPA's great strength in providing assistance in the areas of population and reproductive health is that it is the major multilateral organization active in the field, with all of the advantages that provides in terms of neutrality, comparative advantage, worldwide coverage, expertise and experience based on over 25 years of programming. In carrying out its mandate and in furthering the goals of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Fund takes full account of the provisions of General Assembly resolution 50/120: "the fundamental characteristics of the operational activities of the United Nations system should be, inter alia, their universal, voluntary and grant nature, their neutrality and their multilateralism, as well as their ability to respond to the needs of developing countries in a flexible manner, and that the operational activities of the United Nations system are carried out for the developing countries, at the request of those countries and in accordance with their own policies and priorities for development". Together with the logical and substantive design of a country programme, the careful development of a sense of ownership of all proposed activities by the programme country is vital to the programme's ultimate success. The country programme must be technically sound and must reflect the needs, wishes and capabilities of the country concerned in implementing the ICPD Programme of Action. The Fund believes the procedure being proposed can accomplish that goal

Limiting the administrative burden

9. The programming process is necessarily a lengthy one and requires a great deal of consultation between the Government and UNFPA, other development partners, technical experts, executing agencies and the members of the Executive Board. It also requires numerous consultations and meetings inside UNFPA itself as well as much preparatory work. It is the view of the Executive Director that increasing the number of reports that are prepared for the Executive Board will not necessarily make the Board's highly desirable input into programme design more effective, but it will certainly increase the amount of time and financial resources that the Fund expends in the preparation of documentation. That is time and money that could more wisely be spent on the programmes themselves. A more active involvement of member countries in the PRSD process will certainly involve a moderate increase in administrative energy at the field level, but the results will be more tangible and the costs much less than if the Board were to require a double drafting of all of the Fund's proposed country programmes.

A proposed programming process

10. UNFPA therefore proposes to open up more systematically its PRSD process to a wider participation by interested member governments. As a matter of course, all member countries of the Executive Board will be notified in advance of planned PRSD exercises, and their active participation in the field will be solicited. Instructions will be circulated to all UNFPA Representatives to that

effect. The new programming Guidelines that are currently being developed will incorporate this into the formal structure of the field offices' responsibilities. The instructions will stress that it is incumbent on the Representatives that they allow sufficient time for the embassies and/or the field offices of development agencies to schedule their own involvement. Input received from interested member governments will be considered an integral part of the PRSD exercise. Member states will also be encouraged to pass on their recommendations to the Permanent Missions in New York so that each new programme can be reviewed in light of the suggestions made in the field, ensuring that all feasible proposals have been taken into account.

11. As has always been the case, the PRSD exercise will include extensive consultation and participation by the Government of the programme country and its terms of reference will be formulated to meet the needs and priorities of the government. Once a programme has been drafted, the Government and the Fund will work together to reach an agreed-upon final version for submission to the Executive Board. Following the model now being used by UNDP, any programme would be discussed in detail by the Executive Board if so requested by five members. The Fund would stand ready to discuss any programme in depth and would endeavour, insofar as possible, to have concerned UNFPA Representatives present for both informal and formal meetings during Executive Board sessions. Whatever additional input that is made during the Board meetings, and which is agreed to by the Board as a whole, will be incorporated into the instructions given to the UNFPA Representative for their guidance as they develop the programme activities.

12. The Executive Director feels that a process of including active and systematic participation by interested member governments in the programming process at the field level would accomplish a number of desirable objectives. Above all, such a process would provide the opportunity for real input by member countries into the programming process, which would improve the effectiveness of programme design. The proposed procedure would also streamline the preparatory process, thereby minimizing costs.

Recommendation

13. The Executive Director recommends that the Executive Board endorse the continued use of the current format for country programme presentations while stressing that these presentations should strive to present clearly and analytically issues of greatest importance to the Board as noted in paragraph 1 of this report. The Executive Director further recommends that the Board endorse a programming procedure that invites the participation of members of the Executive Board in the programme review and strategy development (PRSD) exercise and that the proposed programmes be taken up on a no-objection basis at Executive Board sessions.